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The CIA loses a g

By Edwin M. Yoder Jr.

WASHINGTON — Wave-making resignations are frowned upon in this city and Adm. Bobby Inman followed form when he quietly resigned, last month, as deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

But when the resignee is, in the souped-up words of an Inman profile in the May Playboy, our "smartest spy ... the shadowy genius of CIA," speculation is unavoidable.

The Playboy hype is largely nonsensical, but few departures have disturbed thoughtful people as much as Inman's.

Inman's own explanation leaves no doubt that he is, in part, another casualty of the arbitrary ceilings on top government salaries that too often expose gifted public servants to financial lures in the private sector — especially as their children near college age.

But few of Inman's close associates believe that he is leaving primarily for personal or financial reasons. He has been the top man, compiling a brilliant record, in two other critical intelligence functions: the Navy's and, more recently, the National Security Agency's. He was a consensus choice, among intelligence professionals, for the top job at CIA, later if not now, and agreed to serve as number two only at President Reagan's personal request.

Reagan's choice was his campaign manager, William Casey, and Inman has gallantly denied that there is or was personal friction. Nonetheless, Casey is a White House insider and it is in the White House that Inman's chronic detractors have their lair.

Inman has not earned their love or pleasure by successfully resisting certain amateurish and politically naive attempts to "unleash" the CIA in ways sure to revive the destructive quarrels of the mid-Seventies over "domestic spying"; designs equally sure to undo his own quiet efforts to rebuild an intelligence capacity stricken by congressional inquisitions.

When Casey got into trouble with the Senate Intelligence Committee last fall (it later pronounced him

"Too late, Diogenes, Bobby Inman just quit!"

"not unfit" to continue as CIA head), Inman's Senate supporters thought his time might be coming. But word went out from the White House that if Casey were pushed out, Inman would not succeed him.

It's hard to keep a gifted and experienced professional by assuring him that his way to the top is sealed and barred. (Inman may also have been a victim of the suppressed Bush-Reagan staff rivalries at the White House.)

Inman's approaching departure, though he is to be replaced by a respected CIA hand, John McMahon, leaves a vacuum in the top leadership in the intelligence community. Reagan's appointment of Casey, with his hoary credentials as a World War II OSS officer, may not be in the Caligula's-horse category of frivolity. But it was the most dubious since Nixon and Kennedy made their campaign managers attorney general.

Casey, 69, is widely regarded as out of date and out of touch with congressional opinion, erratic in judgment and inept at administration and making his views or purposes clear to anyone. Friendship with the President gives him secure anchorage at the White House. But at the State and Defense Departments, and on Capitol Hill, he is seldom seen and not seriously regarded.

With Casey largely out of it, Inman has been the intelligence community's interpreter and advocate in Congress, admired by all except (it is

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National Security Agency (which gathers signal intelligence), Inman learned from wire intercepts in March, 1980, that Billy Carter was wheeling and dealing with the Libyans — illegally, it appeared, since he was not registered as a foreign agent.

When Inman's first notification of superiors was unavailing, he took the violation directly to the Justice Department, as regulations required. Thus in a collision between duty and bureaucratic caution, he followed the book: even in a sensitive matter implicating the President's family.

More recently, Inman has publicly advocated self-restraint by U.S. scientists whose free play with sensitive technology offers easy espionage windfalls for the Soviet Union. His candid pleas for voluntary restraint did not endear him to scientists. But as a man of intellect, sensitive to the vulnerabilities as well as the strengths of the open society, his open handling of a hot subject was impeccably — and typically — professional.

Inman's departure will leave several controversies still hanging, notably a dispute over the organization of counter-intelligence. Some of the administration's hotshots want counter-intelligence (a function now divided between CIA and FBI) severed from other intelligence functions and centralized in a separate bureau. This idea is regarded as dreadful by Inman and other pros.

Clearly a man like Inman should be on his way up, not out. But his detractors at the White House, now gloating in bureaucratic victory, prefer "personal loyalty" to professionalism. In intelligence word, personal loyalty is of dubious relevance. It is not the duty of the nation's intelligence chief to cushion the bad news about some cockeyed foreign enterprise out of deference to a President's sensibilities. And that is something an Inman cannot be imagined doing.